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TAGS: PHUM SOCI KIRF PTER LE VT

SUBJECT: VATICAN: FORMER FOREIGN MINISTER TO BE ISLAM CZAR

REF: A. 06 VATICAN 21

¶B. 06 VATICAN 199 ET AL.

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CLASSIFIED BY: Peter Martin, Pol/Econ Chief, Vatican, State.

REASON: 1.4 (b), (d)

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Summary

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¶1. (C) Pope Benedict XVI has appointed former FM Jean Louis Tauran as President of the Pontifical Council for Inter-religious Dialogue, the lead Vatican department for relations with non-Christian faiths, including Islam. The move restores the autonomy of a Council that Benedict had placed under the leadership of the head of another Vatican department last year. It also brings in a seasoned Vatican diplomat with Middle East experience who shares Benedict's views on the need to stand firm on religious freedom and terrorism issues when dealing with Islam. Although Tauran went into early retirement as FM in 2003 due to health reasons, sources tell us his condition has stabilized. Our contacts are optimistic that Tauran will energize the department that deals with these crucial issues. Please see biographic information in paragraph eight. End Summary.

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Tauran Back  
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¶2. (SBU) Pope Benedict XVI has appointed former FM equivalent and now Cardinal Jean Louis Tauran as President of the Pontifical Council for Inter-religious Dialogue. Tauran went into early retirement as FM in 2003 at the age of 61, ostensibly for health reasons - he apparently suffers from a form of Parkinson's disease - and was appointed as Vatican librarian and archivist, a largely honorific position.

¶3. (C) The appointment restores independence to the Council for Inter-religious Dialogue. There was consternation in some

quarters when the pontiff decided in early 2006 to expand the brief of the President of the Council for Culture (Cardinal Paul Poupard) to include the Council for Inter-religious Dialogue. The pope had relegated Dialogue's former president, Archbishop Michael Fitzgerald, to the nunciature in Cairo (ref a). Many interpreted the move as a down-grading of the Vatican's dialogue with other religions, in particular Islam. At the time of the restructuring, the Holy See insisted that this wasn't the case - and it wasn't inevitable that the move would have that result. But in practice, Poupard did not prove to be the man for the job, providing little leadership and direction for the Holy See's policies related to Islam.

¶4. (C) Tauran told the media June 26 that the reaction to the pope's lecture in Regensburg, Germany in September 2006 (ref b) was linked to Benedict's restoring the Council's autonomy, noting that communication with Islam was a top priority. He did not admit - nor have other Vatican sources - that the Regensburg speech was a mistake; only that it underlined the need to have a Council with an active president focusing on these issues. In the months following Regensburg it became clear to Holy See officials that Christian-Muslim issues would remain central for this pontificate, and the pope would need better support to deal with them.

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Diplomatic Experience  
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¶5. (C) Our contacts were enthusiastic about Tauran's return to center stage. A high-level official in the Secretariat of State told us that he understood Tauran's health had stabilized and it had become obvious that he was wasted - and frustrated - in the library. He hailed Tauran's diplomatic experience, both his

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four-year assignment to the Vatican's Nunciature (Embassy) in Lebanon, and his thirteen-year stint as Secretary for Relations with States (Foreign Minister equivalent). "Tauran brings a knowledge of the Islamic world and of diplomacy to the job that Poupard can't match," our contact said. "The inter-religious issues don't take place in a vacuum - you have to understand the political and diplomatic context," he added.

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Reciprocity  
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¶6. (C) Tauran will be very comfortable following Pope Benedict's doctrine of reciprocity - the idea that the West should stand up to the Muslim world on issues of religious freedom and religiously-inspired violence. In 2003 he told the media that there were "too many majority Muslim countries where non-Muslims are second-class citizens." In one exchange that has become a part of Vatican lore, Tauran was pressing a Muslim guest on religious freedom issues in his country. The guest responded by asking Tauran why there weren't any mosques in Vatican City. If we had Muslims living here, Tauran responded, we would build one. Indeed the presence of the largest mosque in Europe here in Rome provides an easy talking point for Vatican officials. On terrorism, as well, Tauran is no apologist for Islam, insisting that Muslim leaders must

categorically condemn religiously-inspired violence.

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Cosmetic Fix?  
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¶7. (C) Some have charged that the Tauran move is simply a cosmetic fix to appease the Muslim world, giving the impression of beefing up the dialogue department by placing an experienced cardinal at the helm. They argue that the ailing Tauran will make few changes to the status quo. We disagree. By turning to this quintessential Vatican diplomat, Benedict has restored gravitas and political smarts to the inter-religious dialogue portfolio. If Tauran's health remains stable, he promises to create new energy for these endeavors. Already, he has announced plans to bring together representatives from his council and various other Vatican departments with concerns that touch on Islam to address these issues and develop a "complete vision" for a way ahead. The notoriously compartmentalized Vatican bureaucracy would benefit immensely from such efforts.

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Biographical Information  
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¶8. (U) Cardinal Jean Louis Tauran was born in Bordeaux, France on April 5, 1943. Ordained a priest in 1969, he entered the Vatican's diplomatic service in 1975. After serving at the Holy See's nunciatures in the Dominican Republic and Lebanon from 1975 to 1983, he moved back to the Secretariat of State. Representing the Holy See at the Conference on Security and Cooperation in Europe from 1983 to 1988, he pressed the Vatican's position on human rights, promoting the late Pope John Paul II's hands-on policy towards the crumbling Soviet-bloc. Named Under-Secretary for Relations with States (DFM) in 1988, he was quickly promoted two years later to Secretary (FM equivalent). Pope John Paul II ordained him an archbishop in 1991 and named him a cardinal in 2003.

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